

**MINUTES OF THE LOCAL JURISDICTION MEETING OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION
November 7, 2002**

The local meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 9:00 a.m., November 7, 2002, at the VR Lee Community Building, 221 SW 13th Street, Chehalis, Washington.

Commissioners present were: Ed Barnes, Elmira Forner, A. Michèle Maher, George Kargianis, Chris Marr and Connie Niva.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Commissioner Kargianis welcomed the meeting participants. He explained that the Commission meets in communities outside of Olympia four times a year to gain an in-depth understanding of transportation issues important to various areas of the state. The information gathered helps the Commission to develop plans, policies and budgets.

Mayor Bob Spahr, City of Chehalis, and Eric Johnson, Lewis County Commissioner, welcomed the Commission and meeting participants.

DISCUSSION REGARDING STATE AND REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Commissioner Kargianis commented that Washington State faces the need for substantial investment in transportation infrastructure and that the Commission will continue to advocate for the transportation system, on a statewide basis, and develop policies, plans and budgets. He indicated that the Commission is interested in Southwest Washington communities and wants to work with them toward transportation improvements.

Don Wagner, Southwest Region Administrator, provided a general overview of Southwest Washington's specific transportation needs. Rural communities in Southwest Washington are divided by the I-5 corridor and need to have adequate access to the I-5 corridor in order to provide economic growth. The communities off of the I-5 corridor require easy access to the corridor to meet community needs such as shipping goods, medical services and economic development. Mr. Wagner described the I-5 corridor as the lifeline for all of the west coast states. He commented that communities on and off the corridor need interchanges and access improvements to I-5 in order for the communities to continue to thrive. Before the election, Southwest Washington was looking at two transportation budgets to meet the needs of the area: Referendum 51 new law budget that would allow for some improvements both on and off of the I-5 corridor, and a current law budget that would allow for basic preservation and maintenance.

Mr. Wagner stated that a major challenge for the Department is keeping environmental mitigation costs under control along the I-5 corridor where there is flooding in Southwest Washington all the way to the Oregon border. Centralia and Chehalis have ten miles of city streets that become congested as a result of I-5 closure during flooding that occurs every five to ten years. Commissioner Kargianis inquired if the local community is involved in solving the flooding problem. Mr. Wagner responded that the Department, local officials and the US Army Corps of Engineers are working on a plan to build a levy system that would be half the cost of raising the freeway above the floodplain. The community is working with the Department to match state and federal revenue dollars along with local funds to move forward with the flood project. He commented that Referendum 51 would have provided the Department with funds to match federal funding to complete the project on the I-5 corridor. If alternatives are not obtained to move forward with improvements to the I-5 corridor, rural communities will continue to suffer economically and traffic congestion will continue to grow. Commissioner Kargianis invited local business owners to participate in the discussion to share how flooding and closure of the I-5 corridor has impacted their business.

Judy DeVaul, Port Commissioner, Port of Chehalis, commented that Lewis County is interested in widening the I-5 corridor through Centralia and Chehalis, but the major issue is flooding. The flooding is causing economic hardship all over the county. Ms. DeVaul commented that there needs to be creative solutions to solve the flooding and widening of the I-5 corridor. She pointed out that if Lewis County's economy improves, the County will be less dependent on the rest of the state. She stated that the community is prepared to invest in the future.

Mayor Spahr commented that the Chehalis and Centralia area is susceptible to flooding during rainy seasons as a result of the Chehalis River and two other major rivers in the area. One of the issues with Referendum 51 is that the public perceives that it costs more to build transportation projects in Washington State. One of the possible issues is that environmental assessment costs have increased. The public feels that some of the environmental requirements are not cost effective, and there needs to be some common sense in regulations.

Tim Browning, Mayor, City of Centralia, commented how flooding impacts the surrounding community. Due to the closure of the I-5 corridor, Centralia city streets are used by heavy truck traffic that causes congestion and deters customers from using downtown businesses. He stated that voters want to know where the dollars are being spent, and what is the total cost of projects.

Eric Johnson, Lewis County Commissioner, commented that the public needs to know that the projects will be delivered. Citizens have a lack of confidence in public servants to deliver what they say they will.

Senator Dan Swecker stated that he is looking forward to working with the Commission on statewide transportation issues. Projects need to be funded from beginning to end with a comprehensive plan sequencing and identifying specific projects and revenue allocation to each project. Public trust is an essential element, and to get to that point the public needs to be able to understand what their vote means. He stated that he believes that a strategy incorporating partnerships of private, state, local and federal government is needed in order to bring projects to completion. Local entities need to be more involved in identifying projects and funding sources, and bringing projects to completion. Senator Swecker stated that he is serving on the Transportation Infrastructure Finance Alternative Committee. The Committee's goal is to seek alternative funding opportunities and partnerships to meet transportation needs.

Dean Lookingbill, Executive Director, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council, described his involvement with the I-5 Partnership group. The focus of the partnership is identifying public priorities and alternative funding packages in order to determine what would be feasible to meet community transportation needs.

Commissioners and Department representatives expressed their concerns and opinions about statewide transportation needs and funding sources to the roundtable participants. Commissioner Forner commented that she appreciates Senator Swecker's invitation to the Commission to partner with communities and legislators to meet transportation needs. She feels that the Department is accountable and that revenue spent can be tracked with a high taxpayer return on investment. Commissioner Barnes stated that he approves of an interactive approach with communities and officials. He agrees with Commissioner Forner that the Department has been accountable through audits, but proponents have not accepted the validity of the audits. Commissioner Niva commented that partnerships between local, state and federal governments are critical. The Department needs to define exactly which projects transportation funding will go to. Commissioner Marr commented that the entire state agrees that transportation needs must be met, and that the answer is lessons learned from past attempts to obtain transportation funding sources. He commented that accountability and partnering with rural areas would insure regional equity in the distribution of funds. Commissioner Maher expressed concern that rural areas in the state may not be considered as economically important as other areas of the state. Paula Hammond, Chief of Staff, Washington State Department of Transportation, stated that the Referendum 51 transportation package was very specific with regard to what the public would get for their money. The Department outlined delivery dates and demonstrated accountability by providing revenue distribution, project completion dates and quarterly reports to the Legislature. John Conrad, Assistant Secretary, Engineering and Regional Operations Division, provided the Commission with an overview of highway construction costs. An analysis of construction costs indicated that construction costs were eight percent higher in Washington than in other states as a result of Washington's sales tax. The Gray Notebook provides performance indicators showing the Department's accountability. The Gray Notebook is published quarterly and is available to the public.

I-5 CORRIDOR AND FREIGHT MOVEMENT IN LEWIS COUNTY

Rosemary Siipola, Transportation Planner, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Planning Office, and Jerry Sorrell, Transportation Planner, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Planning Office, gave a presentation regarding the SR 432 Interchange/I-5 Corridor proposed access study. The SR 432 Interchange is the link to the Port of Longview, the Kelso-Longview industrial area, and used as a major freight route. SR 432 provides access to Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad as well as being a link to Washington and Oregon coastal communities. The goal of the project is to provide direct limited access highway access to the I-5 corridor. The Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments (CWCOG) funded the study of SR 432 Interchange/I-5 Improvements through the Federal Transportation Community and System Preservation Pilot Program (TCSP). CWCOG's Core Decision Team is leading the study as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Kelso-Longview-Rainier urban area. A team of Federal, State, County and City representatives will meet monthly to work with consultants in preparing the access study report of the SR 432/I-5 corridor. The consultant's responsibility is to facilitate meetings, record project decisions and provide a final document to the Department and Federal Highways Administration for approval within two years. Secondary benefits of the interchange would be to make SR 432 a stronger component of the Columbia River shipping and railroad transportation system in the region, and may include economic development associated with improved access to nearby commercial and industrial property and port facilities. Mr. Sorrell commented briefly about the funding package for the project and local match revenue.

Eric Johnson, Lewis County Commissioner, gave a presentation regarding the Chehalis River flooding. Enhancements to a 30-mile section of the I-5 corridor through Chehalis and Centralia would be a cost effective solution, significantly reduce flood damages, and would enhance fish and wildlife habitat. Enhancements would include modifying the Skookumchuck Dam spillway and raising of the I-5 corridor through the area. The project would be 65 percent federal funds and 35 percent non-federal funds. The non-federal share of funding would not be due until completion of the project in 2003. The measurable outcome would be flood reduction, eliminate I-5 closure during flood events and enhance economic stability to the area. Mr. Johnson commented briefly on the SR 504 project that would complete the highway loop around Mount Saint Helens.

Judy DeVaul, Port Commissioner, Port of Chehalis, presented a report regarding economic development along the I-5 corridor in the Lewis County area. Economic indicators show that the unemployment rate has increased and the average income rate decreased in Lewis County compared to statewide averages. Plans for economic development in the area include significant efforts to bring jobs with livable wages to Lewis County, land-banking and industrial parks/port developments, retail and industrial development and optimization of significant regional facilities to meet growth

management goals. North Lewis County already shows significant growth in retail development and jobs, and the development of former coal mining land. Currently the Harrison Avenue interchange serving Centralia is over capacity and contributes to downtown traffic congestion. Ms. DeVaul stated that the I-5 corridor is the backbone to the infrastructure in Lewis County. Expansion of the I-5 corridor along with interchange improvements would be most cost effective to address economic development if done now.

I-5 PARTNERSHIP STUDY FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Dean Lookingbill, Executive Director, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council, gave a presentation regarding the I-5 Partnership Study. The 28 member bi-state task force appointed by Governor Locke and Governor Kitzhaber includes elected, business, neighborhood and community leaders. The purpose of the I-5 Partnership Study was to develop a multi-faceted plan for the I-5 corridor in the Portland and Vancouver area. The study included freight access, intercity passenger service, and commuter rail. Adopted recommendations propose a rail loop in Clark County, widening of I-5 in the Vancouver area, a new or supplemental bridge crossing over the Columbia River, and additional rail capacity in order to reduce traffic bottlenecks. Washington State and Oregon State, along with the Portland and Vancouver region, would develop a financing plan for transit and highway capital projects. Mark Brown, Government Relations Consultant, City of Vancouver, commented that the project is ready for a funding discussion, and is expected to begin construction sometime in 2005-2007, with expected completion in 2010.

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mary Kay Nelson, Tourism Specialist, Centralia/Chehalis Chamber of Commerce, and Maree Lerchen, President, Destination Packwood, gave a presentation regarding the US 12 Scenic Byway Plan effort. The goal of the US 12 Scenic Byway Plan is to gain scenic byway status for US 12 from I-5 to Naches, increase the viability of the tourism-based economy in Lewis County, and to establish Packwood, Randle and Naches as gateway communities to Mount Rainier National Park. The US 12 Scenic Byway Plan project is actively engaged with community groups, has support from public officials, and is an integral part of the economic diversification strategy with communities along the US 12 corridor. US 12 scenic byway status would provide a framework for maintaining resources for visitors and local residents. It is an opportunity for communities to share cultural heritage with visitors along the corridor. Funding for the project has been requested from the Washington State Department of Transportation, Heritage Corridor Program.

Jim Neva, Director, Port of Willapa Harbor, and Linda Rotmark, Executive Director, Pacific County Economic Development Council, gave a presentation regarding SR 6 and SR 101 coastal connection to I-5. Issues that hamper the economic

development of Pacific County are the lack of a four-lane highway, no rail transportation, no commercial airport, no major shipping traffic and no natural gas pipeline. Pacific County is investing in the economic development of its communities. The plan is to promote tourism along SR 6 and SR 101. The plan includes improvement of city streets in Raymond and revitalization of local attractions along the SR 6 and SR 101 route to the coast. There are safety issues with bridges along SR 6, and the SR 101 highway shoulders need to be widened. The Pacific Council of Governments is working toward optimizing transportation facilities in a rural, natural-resource based county.

LEWIS & CLARK IN THE LOWER COLUMBIA RIVER REGION

Rosemary Siipola, Transportation Planner, Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Planning Office, gave a presentation regarding the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Celebration. The Bicentennial is a significant event for Southwest Washington that will attract tourism. There are many events planned along the Columbia River as part of the Bicentennial celebration. The event is scheduled to begin in 2005. Some of the concerns are parking and transportation needs of tourists. Ms. Siipola described planned improvements along the Columbia River on the Washington side, including shuttle bus access locations and adequate parking for tourists.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Esther Gregg, Wahkiakum County Commissioner, commented that during the summer months there is traffic congestion at the Megler Bridge in Astoria. She stated that there should be a traffic light on the bridge to allow for traffic movement onto SR 401.

Pete Ringen, Lewis County Engineer, expressed his appreciation for the working relationship between the Department and Lewis County, and provided his thoughts on why Referendum 51 did not receive a positive vote.

Ray Gardner, Chinook Indian Tribe, commented that he found the meeting very beneficial.

COMMISSIONER CLOSING COMMENTS

Commissioners commented that local meetings are very useful and that the Commission is committed to addressing funding issues, proposing a transportation plan, will continue to actively participate in local meetings, and remains committed to addressing transportation needs statewide.